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SUBJECT: IRF: CARDINAL SEES OBSTACLES, PROGRESS IN VIETNAM

REF: VATICAN 5352

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR JIM NICHOLSON FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

CARDINAL SEES RESTRICTIONS IN VIETNAM

1. (C) AMERICAN CARDINAL BERNARD LAW REVIEWED WITH POLOFF JANUARY 28 HIS MID-DECEMBER TRIP TO VIETNAM AT THE INVITATION OF VIETNAM'S NEW CARDINAL, JEAN-BAPTISTE PHAM MINH MAN. LAW SAID HE SAW NO SIGNS THAT THE GVN WAS EVEN INCHING TOWARDS ALLOWING THE CATHOLIC CHURCH A ROLE IN CIVIL SOCIETY THROUGH TRADITIONAL MEANS SUCH AS SOCIAL SERVICES AND EDUCATION. HE LAMENTED THE BACKLOG OF STUDENTS APPROVED FOR CATHOLIC SEMINARIES WHO WERE NOT ALLOWED TO PURSUE A VOCATION BECAUSE OF GOVERNMENT OBSTRUCTION. LAW WENT ON TO RECOUNT AN INCIDENT SURROUNDING PLANS HE HAD MADE TO SAY MASS AT A RURAL MONASTERY. THOUGH THE ARRANGEMENTS WERE INFORMAL AND UNPUBLICIZED, LAW DISCOVERED UPON ARRIVAL AT THE MONASTERY THAT HIS HOSTS SAID THEY HAD BEEN CALLED BY THE POLICE A HALF HOUR BEFORE AND FORBIDDEN TO ALLOW "THE FOREIGNER" TO PRESIDE AT MASS.

AND SOME HOPEFUL SIGNS

2. (C) DESPITE THE STALEMATE ON THE CIVIL SOCIETY FRONT, LAW DID SEE PROGRESS IN OTHER AREAS. CARDINAL MAN TOLD HIM THAT HE HAD RECEIVED PROMPT PERMISSION FROM THE GOVERNMENT TO TRANSFER OVER 30 PRIESTS RECENTLY, INCLUDING THREE TO STUDY ABROAD. ALTHOUGH LAW SAID IT WAS REGRETTABLE SUCH PERMISSION WAS NEEDED, HE BELIEVED THE FACT THAT IT WAS GRANTED -- AND QUICKLY -- WAS NOTABLE. LAW ALSO REPORTED THAT SOME BISHOPS HE KNOWS IN VIETNAM ARE MEETING REGULARLY WITH LAY CATHOLIC GROUPS ORGANIZED AROUND DIFFERENT THEMES. FURTHER, PERHAPS SOME DEGREE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS INDICATED BY A REPORT TO CARDINAL LAW FROM THE BISHOP OF HUNG HOA, WHO SAID THAT HE HAD SEEN A FLURRY OF NEW CONVERSIONS TO CATHOLICISM IN HIS DIOCESE, DESPITE A LACK OF CLERGY. SOME ARE APPARENTLY TUNING IN TO EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN RADIO TRANSMITTED FROM OUTSIDE VIETNAM, AND THEN SEEKING THE NEAREST CHRISTIAN CHURCH, IN MOST CASES, CATHOLIC ONES.

REPORT URGES ATTENTION TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ISSUES

3. (C) CARDINAL LAW WROTE A REPORT FOR THE HOLY SEE BASED ON HIS TRIP, THAT WILL LIKELY BE DISSEMINATED TO THE SECRETARIAT OF STATE AND OTHER OFFICES CONCERNED WITH RELIGIOUS FREEDOM. IN IT HE CAUTIONED AGAINST THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPING A POLICY TOWARDS VIETNAM SIMILAR TO ASPECTS OF ITS APPROACH TO CHINA, IN WHICH (LAW WROTE) IT PURSUES ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY, BUT SOMETIMES DOES NOT DO ALL IT CAN TO ADDRESS HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES.

COMMENT: A USEFUL CONTACT

4. (C) THOUGH HE IS CURRENTLY OUT OF THE SPOTLIGHT DUE TO THE MEDIA'S FIXATION ON HIM AS THE CHIEF SCAPEGOAT OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS, LAW HAS LONG BEEN ACTIVE IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AT THE U.S. CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS. HE IS ALSO WELL CONNECTED TO THE AMERICAN VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY THROUGH HIS MINISTRY TO THE IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES OF BOSTON. HE IS A MEMBER OF THE PONTIFICAL CONGREGATION FOR THE EASTERN CHURCHES, THE CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, AND THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE FAMILY, AMONG OTHER VATICAN STRUCTURES. ALTHOUGH HE SPENDS SOME TIME IN ROME IN CONNECTION WITH HIS WORK WITH THESE ORGANIZATIONS, HE NOW LIVES PERMANENTLY IN MARYLAND, AND COULD BE A USEFUL CONTACT FOR DRL/IRF.

NICHOLSON

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